

The Last Afternoon of the Revolution



**Lois
Leardi**

A wild rose drooping out of the narrow neck of a slender bottle. The bottle, old blue glass, gleaned from the woods by a colonial foundation site, near the sunken stone walls that framed the reservoir. The rose taken from the same woods, near the same ancient homestead. The bottle resting on a tin-topped table once used to roll out pasta, the flour and the semolina, the flat knife. The table scarred with ancestral industry, having made its way across the ocean from Italia, having been treasured and cradled up into the Hudson Valley, along with the straw-bottomed chairs, two of them, that now rested in the kitchen of the shack where Rose lived. The kitchen floor, pitted and uneven, covered in brown and yellow linoleum that was also pitted and uneven where it had been rolled up over the primitive concrete to keep out whatever wanted to grow or seep through the cracks of summers and winters gone by, lost to people surely dead who had done time in these three rooms that sat on the edge of the meadow like a cheaply thrown together footnote at the bottom of society's most forgettable page. The kitchen, a small haphazard nod to modernity, with its chipped enamel sink, stained blue and green and gold near spout and drain, lime encrusted and bald from scrubbing. The tiny dollhouse-like gas stove with its four burners and an oven no bigger than a cupcake. Splatters of grease and red sauce on the wall above it where a crooked sheet of yellow contact paper was meant to spare the wall itself. Streaked attempts to wipe it down. In contrast to the stove, a large behemoth of a refrigerator, rumbling noisily to life on the half hour. A broken handle on it, from which hangs a red string that ends in a frayed potholder, red and blue flowers almost indistinct below scorch marks and a patina of black stains. Walls painted in pale orange oil based high gloss, shimmering and reflecting every

nuance of light and shadow. A bare bulb on the ceiling, dangling like an ominous fire hazard. Also, on the floor, a kerosene stove looking more dangerous than useful. The wick badly trimmed, ragged, the top piece black with soot. The whole of it like a robot or huge insect, as if it could come to life and threaten the entire vicinity with some sort of evil mischief.

On the straw-bottomed chair, at the head of the table, a woman. A twenty-four-year-old woman in the year 1972, Rose. Rose naked from the waist up, having just shaved her head and flung open the kitchen door to gaze out over the meadow where an August thunderstorm was about to break into reality. Rose in the bruised darkness, in the expectant silence, keeping house with herself, being utterly still.

Rose in a pair of baggy combat pants, loose at the waist to the point of drooping, crotch hanging down to mid-thigh, cuffs in tatters. Mexican sandals on her feet, way too large, men's sandals, tire treads for soles, leather uppers a complex weaving back and forth of rawhide strands, basket-like and funky, in the way of the time. Feet brown and solid within the sandals, the toes well rounded and fleshed out, dirty nails with the faintest specks of some old touch of pink nail polish. The navel at the core of her deep and dark, with the beginnings of a thatch of black hair running out the bottom of it. The rib cage taut in sun-darkened skin, swarthy skin, masculine looking skin until it rounds at the breasts, firm ones, large and ripe and healthy looking, virile looking, too opulent looking, brimming and bordering on obscene in their bold nudity. Beside each an armpit sprouting a wad of curly wet hair, sweaty and incongruous, these armpits are too manly to be on any

woman's body. The whole structure of a mountainous European stock, low to the ground, compact, built to weather hardship. The face broad and thickly boned. The dark overbrow, wide and untamed. The blunt nose, the unshocked eyelids drawn over obsidian pupils, the mean mouth, small, downturned even in a smile, the feral teeth, brown and yellowed with tobacco stains. The grainy palmed hands, built for rough use. The round wrist bones and hard forearms, the biceps muscular.

Rose at twenty-four in the year 1972, gazing out her kitchen door at the meadow where an August thunderstorm is about to commence.

The meadow, going to hay in the palpable August heat. Ragweed gamboling riotously, out of all control. The stateliness of queen Anne's lace, the testosterone madness of heavy goldenrod, the delicacy of purple aster. The heat oppressive enough to be surreal. The insane cicadas, loud, loud, the rubbing, loud, loud. Droning, never stopping; the sheer perseverance unto death. The meadow, so compacted in the heat that it smells bad, where once it was sweet perfume. The meadow rotting from lack of the oxygen it once gave so freely. The needy meadow. The beautiful meadow in its death throes. The death rattle of the cicadas. The shimmer visible in an aura above the hay.

There, a radiant halo above the worn track of the raised aqueduct. Long grasses falling away flat from the track like the part in a woman's hair. Brown rabbits stitching their nervous way through the burrows. Blind moles breaking the surface like

underworld swimmers. Wild flowers gone daft with the drone of insects. The long aqueduct housing a buried pipeline, something crucial to New York City, wherever that foreign country may be. The aqueduct, feeding someone else's homeland. Here, nothing but a riot of over-blossom. The aqueduct winding down to the sudden explosive shock in the landscape that is the reservoir. The reservoir stretching, expanding out, like a noise in this bucolic neighborhood of vegetation, like an angel choir in overwhelming harmony, too much for the eyes to take in all at once, causing them to squint and shield themselves from such glistening jewelry of the sun. The reservoir, so glorious and pristine that it hurts.

In the ditch below the aqueduct, a teepee. A wild and crazy thing made of animal skins, big and ungainly. Scary looking, as if alive. Primal, ancient, connoting spirits and ghosts of some other time. Not now. Creepy in its not-now-ness. Trees all around it, darkness surrounding this primitive abode, Clark's abode. Clark, the landlord of this otherworld. Clark, the scrawny drug dealer who walks through the meadow to collect Rose's rent, to drink Rose's beer, to want Rose badly. Clark, who will momentarily flirt with lightning in the meadow, because he is a fool for the sound of thunder.

And the final player on this land, across the dirt road that is creaking and cracking in this heat, is Elise. Elise of the plain wood frame house with braided rugs and cozy kitchen, skinny Elise in her big baggy dresses, white skin under umbrella in the heat, also wanting Rose badly. Elise under the ominous sky, arms full of Tupperware, stepping out on her tiny porch to sniff

the ozone in the air, to decide to chance the walk to Rose's shack.

A storm is brewing. A violent August storm that has been moving toward this afternoon crescendo since dawn.

Rose has had an inheritance. A rich uncle, somewhere, never met, somewhere in the west, never spoken to, not even gazed at in a photograph, but dead, this uncle, and not wishing his wealth to have passed through Rose's father's hands. This uncle who clearly despised his own brother, and for good reason. Rose's father, hopeless, a hopeless victim of the heroin needle, tracks slathering up his arms and thighs like the ropey bruises that they are. Rose has not seen this father in a very long time, many years now. She hears word of him through furtive meetings with her mother. They are not far away, her parents. They could not be farther away. From this inheritance, Rose gives her rent to Clark. Because of this inheritance, Rose has the luxury of being a renunciate.

In the year 1972, Rose shaves her head. She knows nothing of the long-haired revolution going on in the civilized world. Nor does she know of Buddhism or saffron robes and tinkling hand-cymbals at airports. Rose is cloistered here in the meadow. She knows where to acquire food and necessities. She makes forays to such places, blind stabs into the dark jungle of them, scuttling back to safety in the nick of spiritual time. In the world she is stared at with disdain and admiration, a curiosity, as if valiant in some way, or idiotic in some way; some cross between a liberated woman and something deranged enough to be pitied. In the year 1972, Rose shaves her head because it

makes sense. She has no mental truck with how anyone else perceives this.

It is the vulnerability of this shorn scalp that has gotten Clark's attention. He wants Rose.

It is the masculinity of this shorn scalp that has gotten Elise's attention. She wants Rose.

The first bolt of lightning was followed in less than two seconds by a booming that rattled every windowpane of the shack. With steady hands, Rose lit a cigarette.

And then the sky began to howl out its distress, and under it, in all his wounded glory, was Clark. Clark in the middle of the meadow. Clark in nothing but a ragged pair of overalls. Clark's waist-length hair being wind-whipped outward like great strands of seaweed on a drowning man. Ribbons of Clark's hair doing a mad skeletal dance. Clark like a ghoul, so gaunt, so manic, dancing in the meadow in a violent storm, flirting with death by fire. Clark with his palms raised up and out, his face tilted to catch rain and lightning bolts. Clark doing the insane, the impossible. Rose watching him. Rose needing to fetch him, to lure him out of there. Rose needing to save him. Rose not wanting to watch a man electrocute himself for no damn good reason.

Clark's dog. The dog racing toward her shack like a blur. Ears flat back, nose low to the ground. The whole of the big dog made suddenly compact as it streaked toward her door. Rose turning to take a beer from the refrigerator, in order to entice Clark to come. The dog skidding to a stop on her kitchen floor,

shaking itself, sending a spray of raindrops all about the room. The dog shivering with fear and wet. Rose standing now in the doorway with a bottle of beer raised above her head like a white flag, willing Clark to surrender. The dog beginning to whimper. The dog beginning to keen.

Clark saw her. She saw his grin flashing through the density of his beard. He stopped dancing and began to slowly walk toward her. Clark walked toward her as if in a dream. Beside her, the dog began to bark. Clark strolled nonchalantly through the meadow in a crashing thunderstorm.

“Hey, Rose.”

Rose handed him the beer. He pulled a crumpled joint from his bib pocket and sat down, lighting it with a wooden match.

“Penny for your thoughts,” he said.

“Got none.”

“Well, that proves you’ve transcended.”

Rose smiled.

“You dope, Clark.”

The dog crawled under his chair. There was a loud crack. Neither of them jumped. Rose felt a sudden impulse to embrace Clark, to sift his hair, to undress him. He was thin and ribbed and jointed like a sapling gone dry in a drought, and she wanted to coax moisture from him, and from herself as well. Everything seemed so dry. Nothing was rich, except the silence between them. She did not want him to break it. He seemed to sense this, but she knew he would violate it just the same. He would open it with his whispered words. Clark never spoke in anything but a whisper.

“Hair of the dog,” he said, taking a long pull on the beer. “Looks like we got a long wait.”

He flung his arm in the direction of the door.

"You hungry?" Rose asked. "I could make you an egg."

"Nah. You want a toke?"

"No."

"Say, Rose, what eats you?"

Rose shrugged.

"If you didn't want me here, you should've let me stay out and get struck dead."

"It ain't that," Rose said. "You're welcome. I've just had too much noise."

"I know something that don't make no noise."

Rose grinned and looked at her hands.

"Aw, come on, Rose."

"Shh." Rose leaned over and touched his lip with her index finger.

"Well then what eats you?" Clark asked.

"Ghosts," Rose whispered. "Now don't talk. Let's watch the storm."

He obediently turned his face to the meadow, reaching down to reassure his frightened dog with his hand. The booming out over the meadow was intense. The windowpanes vibrated. The dog let out a whimper.

"Close one," Clark said, not looking at her.

"Yup," Rose said, standing up. She fetched two more beers.

She stood over him for a moment, studying his bare left foot. The edges of the sole were hard and cracked, leathery like a moccasin bottom. He had a hammer-toe, raised in a painful looking claw over the one under it. She wanted to smooth it back into place. Clark was old, old to Rose. He had strands of gray in his beard. She set a can of beer in front of him and sat back down.

"What sort of ghosts?" he whispered.

Rose shivered. She put her palms on her upper arms and felt the ripple of muscle there.

"Like the bogeyman?" he asked.

He leaned across the table and pressed his thumb into her collarbone. Rose shook her head.

"Like the ghosts that leap off freight trains in the dead of night."

"Ah. Drifters. I ain't no drifter, Rose. I ain't been nowhere and I ain't going nowhere."

He took his thumb away.

"You know that, don't you?"

Rose nodded.

"I don't want to go away on a freight train," she said.

"It ain't like that, Rose. It's gentler than that. It ain't like this storm. It's like this rose you got here. It just opens."

"Just be quiet, Clark."

"All right."

He clipped his roach and put it back in his pocket. He went and stood in the doorway, facing out, and braced his hands on the frame. Rose got up and stood behind him and began to braid his hair. It was clean and silky. It smelled like chamomile. His armpits smelled of it, too. The suspenders of his overalls smelled of reefer. She made a thick rope of braid, and then reached in her pocket and pulled out a paperclip and fastened his hair at the hollow above his buttocks.

"You say come and go," he said, not turning around.

"I know. I say I don't know. I say I don't know what time it is."

"It's been time for a while now."

He turned then. He put his hands under her breasts.

"You ain't a little man, Rose."

Rose closed her eyes. She felt very tired, and very small, and old. Her breasts felt as if they were made of wood, hard wood, like cedar. They felt as if they did not belong on her body. They were foreign objects, and yet she could feel the moisture of Clark's palms heating them from below. She felt him stoop; she felt his beard, the jaw below it, nudge her chin. She felt the hinges of her ears, like the rusty metal of the tin-man, gape experimentally. Clark's lips touched hers, still as stone, just resting there. He did not try to kiss her. He was only waiting. His dog whimpered at a violent crash in the meadow. Rose could not move. She would bolt if he spoke.

He did not.

"Rose! Rose! I come bearing gifts!"

"Shit," Clark whispered.

Rose opened her eyes and stood on her toes to look over Clark's shoulder. It was Elise. A voluminous purple dress hung from her scrawny body, under a red umbrella, creating dabs of paint in the dark landscape of the meadow. She bore an armful of parcels wrapped in tinfoil. There was a celebratory air about Elise. Rose knew it was food; Elise tireless in bringing food, feeding everyone but her own skinny self. She loved to watch people nourish their bodies. She shot a wad of questions at them while they consumed her offerings, grilling them on the taste, on the mistakes in this or that ingredient, on the very texture that turned to cardboard in one's mouth under her mothering, or as if one were suddenly eating garbage.

"Damn her," Clark said.

"Shh."

Rose lowered herself back onto her heels. She turned her face up to Clark.

"Close call, Rose."

"I'm glad she's here. It ain't time."

"It's past time. You got no man."

"That wasn't all that was keeping me," Rose said, stepping back from his arms.

'No, I s'pose not. I reckon you were his little man, too."

"Who's that with you?" Elise called from the middle of the meadow. "Is it Clark? Clark, is that you? Oh, I hope so. Oh, good. I've brought plenty, I would have more, but the storm's knocked out the power. Rose, do you have power? It's Clark with you, isn't it? I can't see."

"Asshole," Clark muttered.

"She means well."

"So do I. Tell her to go on."

Rose did not reply. She left him standing with his back to Elise and went into the bedroom. She did not want Elise to see her breasts. She rummaged through the pile of laundry on the futon and pulled a sleeveless undershirt over her head. Then she sat down on the bed in the midst of her dirty clothes. She listened to Elise gain the threshold.

"Oh, I thought it was you, Clark. I'm so glad you're here. Isn't this some terrific storm?"

Rose knew Elise was lying. She was not glad Clark was here. Elise wanted to fondle Rose's breasts.

"The raisins for the carrot cake were hard, so I soaked them in prune juice. Oh, and I put in walnuts. You're not allergic to them, are you? And there's egg foo young. And a brown rice and seaweed casserole. Short grain rice. I strained it. There were a few particles. Pebbles and such. The eggs in the Chinese

dish are from free running chickens. Fertile eggs. I hope I didn't put too much sea salt in the gravy. It's made with..."

Rose folded her arms across her stomach. She shook her head. Her eyes felt grainy. She drew up her knees and rested her arms over them and put her chin on top.

"Where did Rose go?"

Rose heard the rasp of Clark's match. She knew he was shrugging.

"Rose? Rose?"

She wanted silence. She did not answer Elise. She knew Clark would not call her name. She foraged with her hand under the clothes and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. She lit one. She flicked some ash on the floor. There was yet another crash. She heard the dog begin to keen.

"Oh, my darling little pumpkin, my woosie, woosie, it's all right," Elise crooned. "My poor little doggie boy, you're scared, aren't you? Clark, is Rose in the bedroom? Rose! Rose, can I come in?"

"Why don't you leave us be?" she heard Clark ask.

"Us? Us? I didn't know you owned Rose, Clark."

"We don't want your damned charity food, and we don't want you."

"What are you talking about? I've been slaving over the stove this whole morning, and that's the kind of thanks I get? This is the kind of welcome I get? This isn't even your home. Is Rose in the bedroom? Is she hiding from me? I just saw her in the doorway as I was walking through the field. What are you up to, anyway, Clark? You've got a perverted look."

"I'm just green around the gills, Elise. And me and Rose was busy."

Clark's voice remained whispered throughout. The dog ducked through the curtain covering the bedroom doorframe and came in, sniffing at Rose's crotch and then thumping his tail as he licked her hand. Rose took one last puff of her cigarette and mashed it into the floorboards. The dog, coming in here, had surely given her away. There was not to be peace and silence. There was a revolution to be endured, a surging battle that would take place in fits and starts.

"Your dog just went in there. She's hiding, isn't she? Rose! Rose, come out of there! Here I've brought food, and it's going to get cold! I'm coming in!"

"Well for chrissakes Elise, if you're going in there, then go on and go," Clark sighed.

As Elise ducked through the curtain, there was a loud boom. The arm she put around Rose's shoulder was trembling, perhaps from the startle of it, perhaps from something Rose did not care to envision. In a moment the tremor passed, and she ran her fingers over Rose's closely shaved scalp. Rose ducked her head to one side, shrugging off the gesture of affection. She thought of Clark alone in the kitchen, just on the other side of the flimsy curtain. Elise put her mouth to Rose's ear and whispered: "Was he hurting you?"

Rose shook her head and stood up. She stood over Elise and drew her arms over her chest, tucking her hands into her armpits, and tapping one foot.

"I was going to fix him an egg, and now you brought all this food."

"I thought... I thought you'd be pleased to see me."

"I reckon I am," Rose said reluctantly. "It's just that I wanted to be alone."

"Then why is Clark here?"

Rose shrugged.

“Clark was fooling around out there in the storm. I couldn’t let him do that. He takes risks.”

“Don’t take risks with the likes of him, Rose.”

“I ain’t,” Rose said.

“What’s wrong, Rose?”

Rose looked at the floor. Everyone seemed to want to know the answer to that question. A storm was to be lived through. That was enough.

“I ain’t hungry,” she said. “That’s all that’s wrong.”

“You and Clark need to eat. I’ve made all these things. I’ve collected the stuff of them, and put it together, and made it festive, and now we’ve got the storm, as good a time as any to relax and enjoy –”

“Oh shut the fuck up,” Clark muttered on the other side of the curtain. “You windbag full of shit, Elise.”

Elise stood up and balled her hands into fists at her sides.

“I won’t be spoken to that way, Clark.”

“Then get out of the goddamn bedroom and eat this crap yourself, you fucking bag of bones.”

Elise began to cry. She stood by the bed and let it go, her frame shaking with the effort. The dog moved away from her and went beside Rose. It barked, just once, and then its ears drew back and it went into the kitchen with its snout low to the floor. Elise continued. Rose did not touch her. She left her there and went into the other room. Clark was sitting on the edge of the enamel sink, his legs hanging down, drinking beer.

“Hey,” he grinned. “You still love me?”

“How come you’re so mean?”

He shrugged.

“Take your dog and go home,” Rose said.

He hesitated. He shifted his eyes to one side and went very still for a moment. Then he eased himself down onto the linoleum and walked out the door into the storm, bending to drag the frightened dog by the scruff of its neck. He strolled out through the long grass in the downpour. Rose watched him until he was safely across the meadow. She saw him turn down the aqueduct and dissolve into the woods. For a second, just before he disappeared, he looked like a figure in a bad watercolor reproduction.

She took a sack from the cupboard and put Elise's parcels into it. She carried it into the bedroom. Elise was still in the same spot, weeping. A line of foamy snot ran from her nose. Rose pressed the sack into Elise's chest, and her arms came instinctively around it, as if it were a newborn.

"Go home," Rose said.

Elise stopped crying. She stepped to one side around Rose and left the bedroom, Rose stood at the window and waited until she saw the red umbrella and the purple dress weaving as if drunk through the field. Elise stumbled once, falling on one knee in the mud, then righted herself and began to run. She gained the row of mailboxes on the edge of the road and kept running. At the turn she evaporated, leaving an after-image of color, then grayness.

Rose put her hands in her pockets. Just then the refrigerator stopped humming. The power had gone off.

Elise was still smarting from the way she had been treated. Rose knew that. She knew it as she looked out over the meadow to the row of mailboxes where Elise was pacing the road. Elise always paced in front of her mailbox before opening it, because she was always afraid of another rejection slip about

her cookbook. The difference was that she was not looking up toward Rose's doorway. Instead she had her head stuffed in her chest, like a beaten thing, like someone with a wound. And Rose knew that she was the wound.

Rose lit a cigarette and kept watching Elise. Soon, she knew, Elise would look up, with that pitiful, hopeful look of hers, peering nearsightedly across the grasses of the land, as if trying to scope out that it was really Rose, perhaps standing in the doorway as she so often was. And she was. Rose was smoking, waiting for Elise to look.

And then it happened that Elise did not look up. Rose watched as she opened her mailbox, took out the parcel, shrugged her birdlike shoulders, and turned and crossed the road, ambling toward her home.

Rose realized then that she had been holding her breath. She put her hands into her armpits and exhaled.

The next day, Rose stood in her doorway again and watched Elise pace in front of the mailboxes. Elise wore a big brown dress and heavy hiking boots, and she wrung her little white hands in a wadded up red bandana. From time to time she dabbed at her eyes, or threw her arms up, flapping her fingers at the sky as if she were at some sort of prayer meeting.

Rose was waiting for Elise to look up, to look her way. She realized that it was not going to happen.

She lit a cigarette and took a cold beer and started to walk across the meadow. The grass was brittle and hard underneath, dry and slippery. Rose began to whistle an old fiddle tune, quietly, almost under her breath. She kept her head down until she was about halfway across. It was then that she felt Elise's eyes on her, and she looked up.

Elise had gone still in the road. Rose met her gaze and stopped. The breeze carried Elise's voice.

"Rose. Rose. Where did you go?"

Rose shrugged. She began walking toward Elise again.

Rose stood on the other side of the mailboxes, keeping them between her and Elise.

"How's the cookbook business?"

"Oh. Oh, Rose, it's a cruel and horrid world that we live in."

"I know it."

"People are cruel. People are animals, Rose. They care nothing about the offerings of others. They laugh in the face of nourishment, of love. People are cruel because they eat cruelty for breakfast."

Rose stood quietly and smoked.

"Elise, do you know about God?"

"Of course I know about God. What do you take me for?"

"I mean about Jesus and all. Do you know about that?"

Elise nodded and began to wring her bandana again.

"Jesus the savior. Jesus the redeemer of the world. Why these questions, Rose? Why are you asking this? Has something happened to you? Have you fallen victim to some cult? Have you been in with those Jesus People? Oh, dear Lord! Have you been eating the food of Jesus freaks?"

"Nope. It ain't nothing like that. Only I slept a night in an empty church once, a long time ago. They had that Jesus fellow hanging up in there. That's all."

"Jesus fellow? Jesus fellow indeed! Rose, you watch how you refer to the Christ of God."

"What?"

"Why, you could be struck dead for such a casual reference. Rose, don't you know anything? Did no one bring you up to have proper respect?"

Rose shrugged again.

"Well, anyhow, it's good to see you, Elise. I wish you luck with the mailman today."

Rose turned away.

"You could go to church, you know, Rose. You could receive adult instruction."

Rose felt her back stiffen.

"I don't reckon," she muttered over her shoulder.

Autumn was coming to the meadow.

Soon she would hear the flight of geese under the moon.

Soon Clark would be cold in his teepee.

She pulled on her shirt and her worn out chinos. She went to the bedroom to look for some proper shoes, since the roads were rugged, and the weather a bit cooler. She was lifting the bottom of the futon off the floor to pull them out when the hairs on her forearms stood up.

"Hey, Rose."

So he was here. He had not come across the meadow, or she would have seen him.

"Where you been, little girl?" Clark whispered.

She smelled him behind her. She smelled his hair, oily and musty, and the scent of reefer, and old cotton and denim.

"Umm..."

Clark snorted a short bark of a laugh.

"Um? Near three days, and you say um?"

"Well..."

Rose kept dragging her shoes from under the bedding.

"Aw, Rose, turn around," he said.

She did then. He was thinner than ever, and browner, and his eyes had a weariness.

"I reckon you been missed round here."

"Elise don't seem to think so."

"This ain't about Elise, Rose."

"I was going on out to the coffee shop."

"This ain't about the coffee shop, Rose."

"Clark—"

He put his palm on the nape of her neck.

"I reckon I'm supposed to smile, Clark. I supposed to smile at you, and at Elise, and at everybody."

"A smile don't mean a damn, Rose."

Rose had to remember to breathe again.

"I need to go out."

Clark nodded.

"You need a lot, Rose."

Maybe she did not need enough. Maybe that was the problem. Maybe she did not need Clark the way he wanted. Maybe she did not need to be smiled at, and that was why she never smiled. Damn, it was hard to tell.

"Look, Clark—" Rose cleared her throat and put a hand on her chin, as if trying to think. "Look—Do you want a beer?"

"Sure."

She went to move past him, but he caught her by the shoulders. Her face fell forward into his beard.

"Where have you been, Rose?"

"I ain't been nowhere. Hell, I'm here. That's what counts."

"You been somewhere. What kind of freak told you to smile?"

"Don't get me mad, Clark."

Clark snorted.

"No, I won't, little Rosie. You just never were much good at telling time."

He put his arms around her.

"Little lost Rose. Never knowing what time it is."

"No, I guess I don't. Don't know if I want to know, Clark."

"Yeah, I reckon you're too busy trying to smile, for chrissake."

"It ain't that. Now, you want that beer?"

"Sure," he whispered, but he kept his arms around her, not moving.

"I guess I don't understand what it is," she said quietly.

"I missed you, Rose. I missed what this is. Something's gone down in you. Me, I kind of like it, all right. I figured you'd make it back here to me all hard and gritty, but this is a good thing, Rose."

"I feel I'm a stranger to my own self."

"I reckon you're right here."

He stepped away from her then, giving her the space to look at him. He was raggedy and old, but ever so tender looking in the light from the bedroom window. Rose couldn't much bear that. She broke the mood then, and went past him into the kitchen, taking out two beers. It took Clark a moment to follow. Then he settled down at the table. They sat with each other and did not speak. They sat for a long time, and the afternoon began to turn soundlessly to dusk. Nothing touched that silence. It was near dark when Clark stood up and left without a word.

Rose has not told them where she disappears to each day. Clark and Elise have been left in the dark by her, deliberately.

The walk down the aqueduct to the road, to the bus stop. The bus to the small town on the Hudson. The coffee shop in the town. It is here that Rose has been meeting her mother. Three days she has been meeting her.

Rose in her baggy fatigues and steel toed hiking boots. Rose in a threadbare flannel shirt. Rose with her head shaved. Rose spooked to be in town, the ratty river town of her childhood. Rose in the coffee shop, trying to be invisible. Rose with her face set like flint, in her fake stance of confidence. Rose seeing the world, a cigarette dangling from the corner of her mouth. Rose seeing people her age for the first time in years. On the other side of the plate glass window these young people go by, long haired and tattered. They weave on the sidewalk in slow motion. They carry guitar cases and sometimes flowers. Beads, ropes of them, hang about their necks. The men have beards. The women have big earrings. Their heads hang down, their eyes dart up, taking in life. These are the people of Rose's generation.

These are people Rose has no knowledge of. Rose is not interested in them.

Whatever their drama, Rose is not involved here. Rose smokes and drinks coffee.

Rose waits for her mother to arrive.

Rose's mother. She opens the door of the coffee shop, and the bell above it jangles. This is a small woman, small of bone, small of frame. She has none of Rose's bluntness. She is all sharp angles; shoulders, cheekbones, wrists and long fingers. This woman looks like poverty on every level. This is a defeated woman who carries herself with exquisite dignity.

This is a woman that the world dare not look down its nose at. Even the eyes of hippies follow her with admiration. But the woman herself seems hardly aware of it all. She is insular. She is what will come to be known as awesome. She carries wisdom in the very pockets of her cheap and patched up clothing.

And Rose is proud to know her. At last.

They have grown more comfortable with one another in three days. They are slightly more relaxed. Her mother finds the table with her eyes, moves toward Rose. Silently, Rose offers a cigarette. Her mother lights it and leans back, then forward, sharp elbows on the formica, looking at Rose. They each hesitate to see who will speak first, courteous, anticipatory.

“How do you do it?” Rose asks. “How can you do it? Why do you stay with him?”

This is the opening question, the one that will now set the tone of all that will come out of today.

Rose’s mother smokes for a moment. Rose watches her intellect working, the bunching up of the brow, the slight flare of nostril.

“I stay because of love. Because I love him and always have. I will always love your father. It’s beyond my will now. It’s something of God. It’s God’s will that I stay and love him. I have no power to walk away. If I had the power, I would not exercise it. There are some women, Rose, who do not fall out of love with their man, no matter what the society will tell you. America is sometimes a cheap and spineless nation altogether, in its pursuit of comfort and happiness. The culture would have told me to leave long ago. But that is the culture’s disease, not mine.” Rose considers this. She looks at her hands, then out the window at the people going by.

An older woman brings them coffee. She leaves them. She has seen these three days from the other side of the coffee shop. She knows they will not require anything else of her but a check.

"It doesn't sound right," Rose counters. "I reckon someday he will hurt you. I don't much understand how a person can linger in the face of hurt."

"Then you don't know anything about real life, Rose. Then you've got your head in the sand up in that meadow of yours. The whole purpose of what you think you're doing up there is void if you don't understand this one simple thing."

Rose blushes. She feels the heat on her face and neck. She is being put down here. She is being judged a simpleton. Oddly, though she blushes, she takes no offense.

"I don't guess I understand this culture any more than you do," she says. "Only it's looking like it's got a bit under my skin in spite of me."

"That's almost unavoidable," her mother concedes.

"It sounds glum," Rose says.

"No. It's a beautiful world, Rose. This is an extremely beautiful world."

"Ma, for crying out loud, he's a damn heroin addict."

"Yes. He's a man sick to death."

"And it's a beautiful world?"

"It's a beautiful world, Rose."

Rose lights another cigarette.

"How could your world be beautiful? How could your life be beautiful?"

Her mother shrugs. Her mother smiles. It is not a rueful smile in the least. It is a glowing, magnificent thing on her mother's face.

"I don't understand."

"No. You don't."

"Show me," Rose says. "Show me what you're talking about."

"All right."

Rose fishes for some change. For a dollar bill.

"Then come," her mother says quietly. "Come with me, Rose."

Rose stands up.

The river at the earliest turning of autumn. Reeds and rushes. Cattails, brown against the sparkling diamonds of the Hudson. The clanging of bells, railroad and convent. A small boy playing a wooden flute by a shoeshine box at the station.

Rose's mother, drawing the crab nets out of the trunk of her old car. Rusty metal cages on ropes of fraying clothesline. The rotted pier jutting out by the power plant to the south of it. Picking their way over the boards, out, out into the river, as if they could keep going clear to the other shore. The hills and mountains there, the landings of the other side, the foreign side, the side that is not their side. The glinting off the bridge that makes a mock attempt to connect two vast and different worlds. The waterfowl. And the stripers perhaps still running in the deep. The swift otter. There, seen ever so rarely, the eagle, noble to the naked eye. The pier a riot of yellow jackets; they bat them casually away from time to time as they prepare the nets with bait, chopped up bluegills and bits of sunnies. They are silent at their task. Rose has not been here, has not done this, in years. She feels the child, the small girl inside her. Her father is not present, but she feels the wonder of him. He stands over the two of them like a silent visitor on this day. He

is tall and lean with his gold tooth glinting in the sun, shirtless and happy and free. Rose and her mother are nodding to him in this silent act of going crabbing on an early autumn day. Rose understands fully the significance of what they are enacting. She knows that this is the purpose of why her mother has asked her to come. She realizes that her mother comes here often. It is a place away. It is a place where it is indeed a beautiful world.

Worship. Worship the river. Look to it as they did of old. Take your values from the river. If you possess the river in your soul, then the whole of life is yours to walk in beauty and integrity all your days. This has been drummed into Rose. The life in the meadow has brought her away, and she has lost touch until now. Now, as she watches the arc of the net rise into the air where her mother flings it, she sees the perfect symmetry of her lifespan to date, and Rose knows peace. The net slaps the water and grounds Rose to the bare reality of all she has ever been about in this world. And then her mother turns, with a satisfied smile, and Rose puts off lighting a cigarette for a moment to reach out and rub her thumb into her angled cheek, as if to leave an imprint on the woman who has left one on her this day. Thus they are bound, and the moment passes, and Rose then lights the cigarette and leans on the rail in the wind, squinting into the sun.

She knows now why her mother is here. She has only partial knowledge of why she herself is here. The rest is a mystical sort of intuition that she ought to be here, that some mysterious hand of God himself has brought her here, that a sojourn of sorts has begun that must be played out now, between Rose and her mother, perhaps even between her father and mother as well. For now she is only willing to bask in the sheer and

perfect glory of her mother doing a simple everyday thing, gathering food to feed herself and her man. Rose's mother, doing the right thing with her life. This is mystery enough for now. This is the primal stuff of which Rose's life has been made. This is ordinary survival. This is life on the river, removed from the mainstream of the society that hums and buzzes around them, like the yellow jackets making their angry stabs at Rose and her mother, uncomprehending that a space has open that must be shared in life. Up in the town, young people are living life on their terms and territory, but here, on the river, is a culture they would find impossible to ever truly enter into.

They will wait now. They will wait until the exact and organic moment when their systems tell them to haul the nets. And then there will be bounty.

"How can a person, a woman, stay if she's going to get hurt?"

Rose casts this question out onto the water, over the railing.

"How can she not?" her mother asks back, like an echo, like a song of call and response.

"But... "

"Getting hurt in this life is neither here nor there. Rose, you miss the issue altogether. A woman does not stay in order to get hurt. That is nothing but sickness. That is pure disorder of the soul and mind. No, that is not the point one bit. Dig deeper, Rose. Why would a woman stay? A woman with half a brain? This is your question. I say it is an absurd and moot point. Why? Because it is not the worthy premise. Dig deeper, Rose. Begin to ask the right questions. Surely you won't have any answers to speak of if you don't."

Rose scratches her head.

“Honor?”

“Of course not. Don’t be too quick, Rose. This is not some TV game show. No hourglass is running out.”

For the first time in many years, Rose suddenly flings back her head and laughs, guffaws, her throat open with it, with her mother’s clever remark, with the truth of it, that brings Rose joy and amusement all at once. This laughter, such a shock, such a delight, that it is almost downright sexy, causes Rose to want to prolong it, but, in spite of her attempt, it drizzles out and stops in a short cough, and she covers her mouth with her hand, as if to seal in the memory of its pleasure.

‘You’re right, Ma,’ she says. “Big questions ought to take a good long time to simmer. I’ve gone and shot out of the shoot too early if I’m going to win any prizes in this run. Maybe I can come at the thing more round about. Maybe my own damn youth requires something like that kind of approach.”

Her mother is grinning.

And then, all at once, and in unison, they nod.

“Now!” they both say.

And instantly they begin to haul up the nets.

“No. It’s not just romance. Romance is not bad, but it is a cheap and paltry item. It wears out after just a few washings, if you can understand. It’s an essential ingredient, Rose. It’s got a powerful scent, necessary for survival and all that. But no, it’s not romance. And it’s not the idea of a comfortable broken in shoe, or a hand in a glove. That’s all so much nonsense. If you come from that angle, you’ll never grasp it. That is the angle of youth, to gaze out the corner of the eye, rather than look full in the face. Consider: What romance could there possibly be in a

broken down old heroin addict? And yet: you see it, don't you just? Romantic. The stuff of stories, archetypes. Well, dismiss that."

They stood at the trunk of the car, the old metal pail covered and being scratched from inside by the crabs. Rose smelled the low tide of the Hudson, as unique and familiar as everything she knew herself to be.

"I'm at home here, Ma," she said suddenly, blurting out her words as if startled by saying them.

"Yes."

"I mean — this. Doing this. Just this. This is who I am."

"I know it," her mother said.

"There's this man, Ma. There's this guy, Clark. Clark is his name."

"And he scares you," her mother said, lifting the pail into the trunk.

Rose looked out over the river.

"I reckon that's an ancient story, huh?"

Her mother did not answer.

They stood for a long time.

Finally, Rose embraced her skinny little mother, in her tattered clothing and then she began to walk away from the pier, down toward the street toward the bus stop at the train yard. The day had been well spent. Now the meadow called, where autumn was more pronounced, more in evidence.

Clark is very big in Rose's mind now. Clark is more myth than man. She has managed to suppress what he really is, and make him the stuff of legend. She tells herself that she will be to him what her mother is to her father, that who Clark is does not matter, that what matters is the archetype of Clark, the going

contra to the public and its culture. She tells herself that she will be a revolutionary lover of Clark. She will care for him in a radical way. It is more this caring than Clark that is the issue, as if Clark were something interchangeable in the equation. Thus it becomes not the man, but the idea of man, any man, who possesses a certain shred of romance about him. She tries very hard to buy this line inside herself, knowing full well that she is missing the mark completely.

But this time it is Elise who is standing in her doorway, wringing her bandana, Elise who is lying in wait for Rose to come on home at the end of the day.

“Rose! Rose! Oh, Rose, where have you been all these days? Have you gotten work, Rose? Are you working some job? Or is it this Jesus thing? Are you running off with them all this time? Rose, there can only be ruin in it for you if you run with that crowd! They will leave you out of your senses!”

Rose shrugs her way past Elise and into the shack.

The small table is covered with dishes of food.

Suddenly Rose feels weary, the weariness of some overburdened husband who has just arrived from the office to a hen-cluck of a wife. She sighs and leans down to rid herself of her boots.

Elise begins to describe the food in great detail. She is flitting about the downtrodden little kitchen like a manic bird trapped in an enclosure.

“So come, Rose, wherever you’ve been, you’ve got to be famished by now... come eat, Rose...”

Rose does not have energy.

“Elise, I reckon I need to lay down, is all.”

“Rose! Are you ill? Let me feel your head –”

Rose holds up her hand to ward off Elise's ministrations.

"Look, I swear I'll eat some of this shit later, only I got to go on and be alone now, Elise."

"Shit? Rose, how can you refer to this repast in that manner?"

"I'm dog-tired, Elise."

"I'll sit with you. I'll watch over you."

"I'm I big girl now, Elise. So if you'd just go on."

"Rose, I'm concerned for you. Disappearing each day now, off to God knows where. And those questions, those Jesus questions. Rose, are you right in the head?"

"Quite right, Elise."

"I have doubts about that. I think you need to be watched over."

"Elise, don't try me none now. Go on and let me be before I say something cruel."

Elise will work herself up now if Rose does not turn away and claim her privacy. Knowing this, Rose pushes her shoes back on with tired resignation and simply walks out of her own house, shrugging, lighting a cigarette, crossing the meadow, and heading back down the aqueduct in the way she has come.

Rose thinks of the river, of her old life on the river. Her nostalgia is dangerous to her. It could lead her back there blindly, and Rose does not want to do anything blindly in her lifetime.

In the middle of the night Rose went out and built a small campfire on the hard-packed earth of her dooryard. She pulled on a flannel shirt and sat down cross-legged. She stared at the flames. She stared until she had gone somewhere else, gone in some trance of self-forgetfulness. She wanted to dream and dream. She did not want to see anyone in those flames.

Still, they came, the people who peopled her life. One said that marriage was a great classroom of life. Another said that food was a spiritual journey.

And another said that she was not a little man.

Toward dawn, Clark's dog arrived.

The dog put its leathery nose into the palm of Rose's hand for a moment.

Then it laid down in the dirt beside her.

It was then that Rose allowed herself to lay down as well, and to close her eyes, gone, gone away into the dream of purity. She lay there on the edge of the meadow, and it was like lying on the water of the river, undulating on the earth below the dying stars like a sailor or a nomad, while the whole thing of her life shifted in a lullaby rhythm below her.

She knew she would not go to meet her mother this day. She knew it when she opened her eyes, her heart's pulse thrumming in her chest and neck with some new thing, some thrill of the spirit that was drumming, and she knew she had to follow the drum that was Rose, and not her mother.

She would pine for the pier of her youth, jutting out into the Hudson, causing her to have once believed that she could walk on water, like Jesus.

She went inside then and began to fry an egg. Clark's dog lingered at the door for a bit, and then ambled off, through the meadow, heading toward the aqueduct where Clark's teepee was in the ditch below it. Rose hummed the old fiddle tune. It

was a good day to collect a new rose from the woods, one that was not so faded as the one that was now on her table.

But it was not to be. A car was coming across the meadow, driving bumps and ruts into the beauty of it. Rose knew the car. It was Rick's car. And she knew why he was coming. He was coming to beg. He was coming to beg her to return to the band, to play the fiddle, to help him earn a living, get famous, marry him. Like a needle on a broken record, Rick. And Rose wanting to go to the woods, alone. And Rose knowing that it would not be until she had talked to Rick.

And there, on the far side of the meadow, like an Indian all wild and crazy and gone still, stood Clark.

And surely there would be a revolution of sorts this day.

Rose stood in the doorway and lit a cigarette.

Rick got out of the car. He was clearly drunk, and perhaps stoned as well.

Rose stood smoking in the doorway, regarding him.

"Aw, hell," she said.

"That's what I say, Rosie," he mumbled. "Aw, hell. The hell with it. Why don't you just let me screw you? Aw, bloody hell, Rose."

Rose snorted and continued to smoke.

"How come you shave your head?" he blurted out. "Are you some kind of nun? Some kind of n-o-n-e nun? Hey, I want to talk to you."

"You're too wasted to talk. And I don't want to talk."

Rick came clambering over the ruts of the dooryard and sat down on the step.

“Aw, hell, Rose. Aw, hell, I swear I’m in love with you.”

Rose looked down at him. He had little blue eyes behind thick lenses. His hair was a disaster of yellow curls, and there was a weakness about him in his looks that turned her off. She did not yet dare to glance across the meadow. She knew Clark’s eyes were boring into her.

“If it’s about the band,” she said, “then you got to know that I’m done there. I quit when I quit, and I meant it.”

“What are you talking about? You’re the best of us. Is it because of what I just said?”

“I’m done with the mess of it,” she said.

“What will you do?”

“I reckon you won’t be finding me, man. I’m history from that life.”

“But what will you do, Rose?”

“Aw, hell,” Rose spat.

“I mean it, Rose.”

“I ain’t telling what I don’t know. But I reckon I’m going on a quest.”

“Damn, Rose, make a quest out of me. I’ve been making one out of you for a long time.”

It was here that Rose looked up. Clark was still standing stock still in the trees.

“I got to make this quest on my own. You got to get it straight that I don’t want you. You ain’t got to take it all personal. I ain’t saying it to be mean. I don’t hate you. I just ain’t into it. I ain’t got what you think you’re seeing here.”

“Rose. Look, Rose. Say, who is that guy over there?”

“Clark. That’s my landlord.”

“Whatever. What the fuck does he want, standing there gawking like that?”

“I reckon this is where you go on,” Rose said.

“What are you talking about? What the hell?”

“Don’t mess with my business, Rick.”

“He’s some sorry ass excuse for a boyfriend,” Rick muttered.

“I said don’t mess with it,” Rose said, and then she turned and shut the door on him, leaving him on the step. She knew that Clark was watching intently now, and so she walked into the back of her place and climbed out the window, quietly skirting the meadow from the other side, not yet knowing whether she was going to meet him, or disappear down the aqueduct.

Finally she decided to just sit down in the woods where she was.

Leaving people.

Leaving people seemed to be what was going on these days. Walking out of their lives, walking out on them.

Something was eating Rose.

She had told Clark it was ghosts. That was not accurate at all.

Somehow God was eating at Rose, if she could acknowledge and accept it as a thought, without the baggage of such a weighty thing. Without Elise’s alarm bells, without her mother’s selfless martyrdom, even without the religion of the river she had been raised on Just God. If there was such a thing in the intellect as just God. Pure. And that purity was the rub in Rose’s mind.

But there was Clark. There was always Clark. Clark was always turning, like a sexual question mark, like something weighed out in the palms of one's hands.

The spirituality of Clark. The opportunity of Clark. The dangerous edge of Clark. The knowing that to go into Clark would be annihilation, devastating and sweet, forbidden and all consuming. Moth to the flame stuff, there. Death, for sure. But did that mean death into life? And was that not the core of the God premise? And did that justify making a religion of Clark, or was that simply ludicrous?

It was the confusion of self-doubt, the doubtful intellection of her mind's process that scared Rose the most. She did not know if her thinking was sane. Here in the meadow-life, there was no one real person to bounce her ideas off. In renouncing society and hugging the lot of the loner, Rose had perhaps, she thought, begun to blur her own lines a bit too much.

But one reality was clear. Clark was standing on the other shore of this wide space, like a Buddha-idea, like a beacon, like an insane savior.

Did she dare?

The question was too large. The question set up a vibration that was causing paralysis, and the very lack of tranquility was a red flag in itself.

So Rose sat down in the woods.

It was morning.

Clark was dangerous. Rose knew this. She knew it in the same way that she knew that Jesus was dangerous. It was the two of them, juxtaposed in her mind, that startled her. She had sat in that church overnight, long ago, and studied the big crucifix alone, hours on end of study. She had seen a man strung out, in

some terrible jam of his own making, looking like some bedraggled dope addict, all scrawny and beaten up, resembling so many men of her generation, resembling her father, and resembling the man Clark she would come to pay rent to. And she had known, looking at him on his rack of torture, that he was dangerous.

But perhaps it was the halo of gold round his head that had disturbed her most. How to reconcile the holy and the dangerous? How to love what smacks of the lawless, the renegade, the revolutionary? How to make good everything the world calls bad?

How to smile with love upon what has the power to hurt so bad?

Why was she embracing that?

And Rose knew then that her journey toward Clark had been set in motion.

The great wheel was turning. She sat in the woods and shivered.

Autumn was coming to the meadow.

Soon she would hear the flight of geese under the moon.

Soon Clark would be cold in his teepee.

There was a crashing sound. Rose thought it might be a deer, but it was the dog, bounding over to her and slathering up her ear and the side of her face. Rose put her arm around the thing and it settled quietly down beside her.

She did not realize that Clark had not been far behind. Her body gave a lurch when he placed his hand on her shoulder.

“Don’t be so jumpy,” he whispered. “Don’t act guilty. Who was the freak?”

“Someone of old. Someone from the band I used to play in.”

“How’d he find you, Rose?”

“He was here once before. You remember, he helped me move in. I used his car for that.”

“Ah, Rose.”

Clark sat down and leaned his shoulder into hers.

“What’d he want?”

“Don’t, Clark.”

Looked at that way, without the baggage of his gospel, Jesus seemed so flimsy. There was something of the ordinary gangster about him on the cross, or there had been, to Rose that night.

The outlaw with the halo; and was that not the very crux of the matter in her life now?

The one a person hates to love, but must, like the naughty little boy of the advertising world, whose very image sells things to mothers all over America. Only people like Clark were bigger, dangerous, death defying. And that was the terrifying realization that came over women who loved people like Clark. Women who played with fire, because fire was beyond irresistible. It caused one to draw lines in the sand that would at one time have been unthinkable to cross. And Rose now knew that she was going to be one of those women. She had known it all her life. What had begun with the dangerous Jesus would snowball into the dangerous Clark. And for all the wrong reasons. But it was cumulative now. One foot was following the other now, with a logic of its own, some primitive logic that her system had worked out in advance, and Rose, blind to it, was walking the path anyway. She was going to the other shore.

It was only a matter of learning to tell time.

In the afternoon, Rose went walking on the aqueduct. She knew she would find him there, in his teepee.

“Hey,” she said, ducking under the flap.

Clark said. “Is it time now, Rose?”

Clark raised himself from his pallet. He leaned on one elbow and regarded her.

“Only, Clark, it’s time for me to turn my back on this meadow. Are you coming with me?”

Clark grinned a slow grin and shrugged.

“Sure, Rosie.”

“I reckon the world belongs to us,” Rose said, smiling. “And I reckon there’s revolution in the air.”

Clark stood up then.

“Yeah, I reckon,” he whispered. “Like I said, I ain’t no drifter, Rose. But I reckon there’s moss grown on this old stone that needs rubbing off. When we leaving?”

“We’ll be gone by nightfall,” Rose said.

“Hell, it ain’t like there’s a whole lot to pack,” Clark said.

1972. The meadow. The meadow dying quietly toward a new year. The meadow sinking into its own juice. The meadow rotting. The row of mailboxes sagging in the twilight.

Rose. Clark. A dog. They were seen walking down the aqueduct toward nightfall.